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REPORTS OF DUCK STAMP PRICE INCREASE EXAGGERATED

Recent news reports that the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission is considering a large increase in the price of the Federal "duck stamp" have been misleading, Walt McAllester, secretary of the Commission and chief of the Realty Division of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said today.

"There is a problem with funding for wetlands conservation because one of the major funding sources, the 1961 Wetlands Loan Act, is scheduled to expire in 1983," McAllester said. "The Commission has agreed to study various options for continued funding of the wetlands program. However, the Commission has no authority to set the price of the duck stamp or to implement any other means of funding. The Commission's job is to review and authorize the acquisition of wetland areas proposed by the Fish and Wildlife Service as migratory bird refuges. An act of Congress will be required to extend the Wetlands Loan Act, to increase the price of the duck stamp, or to authorize other funding alternatives. Therefore, waterfowl hunters should be aware that reports of a large increase in the price of the duck stamp are greatly exaggerated."

McAllester said that expiration of the wetlands loan was discussed after the most recent meeting of the Commission on February 9. At that time, Interior Secretary James Watt, who chairs the Commission, said that expiration of the loan would seriously impair the Federal Government's wetlands conservation program.

"Wetlands conservation is an issue that won't wait," Watt told other Commission members. "We must examine ways to accelerate acquisition of these needed wetlands before they are lost to us."

The Federal Government has been acquiring wetlands for some 50 years in order to preserve their values as feeding, nesting, resting, and wintering areas for migratory waterfowl. Wetlands also provide many other benefits to the nation. Funds for wetlands acquisition come from two sources--the sale of

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Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamps, popularly called duck stamps, and the Wetlands Loan Act. Duck stamps must be purchased by all waterfowl hunters age 16 or older. Duck stamp sales presently provide \$15 to \$16 million in revenue annually. The last increase in the price of the duck stamp was from \$5 to \$7.50 in 1979.

The Wetlands Loan Act authorized a \$105-million loan to be used to acquire wetland habitat for waterfowl. The loan has been extended twice and increased to \$200 million, of which about \$145 million has been appropriated. If the loan expires as scheduled on September 30, 1983, the remaining \$55 million will not be available. In addition, under the law 75 percent of yearly duck stamp revenues must then be used to repay the loan. This would leave only about \$4 million annually to purchase wetlands. Because of high land prices and development pressures on wetlands, McAllester said, it is likely that many wetlands would be lost before the government could afford to purchase and preserve them.

Because of the interest of Commission members in the impending funding problem, McAllester said, possible funding alternatives were reviewed after the Commission's formal meeting. Increasing the price of the duck stamp was only one of several possible alternatives that were presented to the Commission and would not provide a total answer to the funding problem, he said.

Commission members were told that, if duck stamps were the sole source of funding, a \$70 duck stamp (based on current sales) would be required to fund the acquisition of 1.6 million acres of wetlands over a 10-year period. Such a high duck stamp price is considered unrealistic. Projections for revenues that would be derived from lesser increases in duck stamp prices were also made to show that the entire cost of the program cannot be supported by duck stamp sales alone. Some of these figures were erroneously reported in news stories as proposals for duck stamp price increases.

Other alternatives, including the importance of providing financial incentives to encourage private landowners to preserve their wetlands, were also reviewed.

Because there was not enough time for a full discussion of funding alternatives, Secretary Watt said he would be studying the matter further and discussing it with Commission members before making any requests or recommendations to Congress or other decisions about funding for wetlands acquisitions. The wetlands acquisition program is one of Watt's responsibilities as Secretary of the Interior.

Nearly half of the nation's original 127 million acres of wetlands have already been converted to agriculture, housing, and other developments, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. At present rates of loss, as few as 36 million wetland acres may remain in the year 2082, of which only about 10 million would be prime waterfowl habitat.

About 1.8 million acres of wetlands have been acquired as national wildlife refuges with the approval of the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission since its establishment in 1929. In addition to Secretary Watt, the Commission members now include Transportation Secretary Drew Lewis, Agriculture Secretary John R. Block, Senator David Pryor (Arkansas), Senator Thad Cochran (Mississippi), Congressman Silvio Conte (Massachusetts), Congressman John D. Dingell (Michigan), and the chief conservation officer of each State where a land acquisition is proposed.